United Nations S/PV.6292

Security Council

Sixty-fifth year

Provisional

6292nd meeting

Wednesday, 24 March 2010, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Mr. Issoze-Ngondet	(Gabon)
Members:	Austria	Mr. Mayr-Harting
	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Mr. Barbalić
	Brazil	Mrs. Viotti
	China	Mr. Li Baodong
	France	Mr. Araud
	Japan	Mr. Takasu
	Lebanon	Mr. Salam
	Mexico	Mr. Heller
	Nigeria	Mrs. Ogwu
	Russian Federation	Mr. Churkin
	Turkey	Mr. Apakan
	Uganda	Mr. Mugoya
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Sir Mark Lyall Grant
	United States of America	Mr. Wolff

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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10-28741 (E)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in French*). The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

I welcome the presence among us of His Excellency Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. I also welcome the presence of Mr. Robert Serry, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by the Secretary-General, to whom I give the floor.

The Secretary-General. I welcome this opportunity to brief the Security Council at this important juncture in our work for peace in the Middle East.

As members of the Council know, I have just returned from visiting Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, following the meeting of the Quartet in Moscow this past Friday.

Before the Quartet meeting, I had a series of bilateral meetings with the Russian leadership, including President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Lavrov. I thanked the Russian Federation for its enhanced contribution to the United Nations agenda and activities, and we discussed the United Nations-Russian Federation partnership on regional and global issues. While in Moscow, I also signed a joint declaration with the Collective Security Treaty Organization aimed at strengthening cooperation on counter-terrorism, drug trafficking, conflict prevention and other areas.

Tomorrow, I depart for Sirte, in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, to attend the summit of the League of Arab States.

These missions take place amid continuing efforts to start Israeli-Palestinian proximity talks and a crisis of confidence spurred by the announcement by Israel of its intention to advance planning for the construction of 1,600 new settlement units in East Jerusalem.

The statement issued by the Quartet in Moscow reflected strong agreement on all main points.

First, Quartet members stressed the need for proximity talks to move ahead and to become direct negotiations as soon as possible, with the goal of resolving all final status issues within 24 months.

Secondly, the Quartet emphasized that the parties should respect the conditions that made proximity talks possible and act in accordance with international law and the Road Map. This includes a freeze of all settlement activity by Israel and fulfilment of security obligations by the Palestinians. The Quartet condemned the recent Israeli settlement announcement, reaffirmed the international position on Jerusalem, and agreed to closely monitor developments and keep under consideration any additional measures that may be necessary. Both sides were urged to refrain from provocative actions and inflammatory rhetoric.

Thirdly, the Quartet expressed strong support for the Palestinian Authority's State-building agenda, which was launched in August last year with the goal of completing preparations for statehood in 24 months.

Fourthly, the Quartet agreed on the need for an immediate easing of the closure affecting Gaza and restated its commitment to a durable solution to the issues of security, unity and crossings, as envisaged in resolution 1860 (2009).

I carried these important messages to the Israeli and Palestinian leaders and their publics. In Ramallah, I met Prime Minister Fayyad and other senior figures. President Abbas was in Jordan recuperating from his recent fall, so I will meet him in Sirte. I was strongly assured of President Abbas's commitment to proximity talks and a negotiated settlement on all core issues. Concern was expressed at changing facts on the ground, which prejudice the outcome of negotiations and undermine trust. The importance of Israel meeting its Road Map obligations — including those to freeze settlements, remove outposts and reopen Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem — was stressed.

The Palestinian authorities emphasized their wish to see a greater Quartet role in defining the endgame, given the desire to avoid past failures. Indirect talks were viewed as a vehicle to achieving progress on

substantive core issues in advance of a direct phase of final negotiations.

Prime Minister Fayyad took me to the Al-Masyoun lookout point, on the border between Area A, which is under Palestinian administration, and Area C, which is under Israeli control. The lookout and the subsequent briefing I received made the Palestinian dilemma quite clear.

Palestinians need to be able to use more of their land for housing, agriculture, industry, water, construction materials and more. Yet, they have limited access to Area C and no role in zoning. Those restrictions prevent Palestinian economic and social development. I could also see the barrier snaking through the West Bank. I have strongly advised the Israeli authorities, while addressing their security concerns, to find a way to further ease the constraints that restrict Palestinian life and risk undermining the eventual viability of a Palestinian State.

Despite these difficulties, the Palestinian Authority is making important gains, becoming more transparent, accountable and effective. I was impressed by the efficiency of the security services and the signs of economic activity. I was also impressed by the Palestinian determination to build positive facts from the ground up as a complement to the political process. Palestinian statehood must become an emerging reality based on legitimate Palestinian rights, positive Palestinian actions and a negotiated political settlement. I confirmed to the Prime Minister the determination of the United Nations country team to continue and expand its support for these State-building efforts. International support remains crucial.

It was also brought to my attention that almost all recent disturbances between Israelis and Palestinians have taken place in areas where Israeli forces are present in Palestinian-populated areas. I received appeals for an end to incursions, the further removal of checkpoints, and more responsibility to be given to Palestinian Authority security forces in Palestinian-populated areas.

We discussed the essential Palestinian commitment to non-violence and legitimate protest in that context. I expressed my concern about Palestinian prisoners and publicly urged Israel to release prisoners, as called for by the Palestinian Authority.

I was deeply dismayed that four Palestinians under the age of 20 were shot and killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank during my visit. Israeli Defence Minister Barak assured me that Israel would investigate those incidents. I publicly condemned all such violence and stressed the importance of protecting civilians.

I also met with representatives of two families that had been evicted from their homes. I made it clear that all settlement activity is illegal and that inserting settlers into Palestinian communities in Jerusalem is particularly troubling. It leads to tensions and undermines prospects for addressing the final status of Jerusalem. Yesterday's announcement that final approval had been given to build 20 settlement units in Sheikh Jarrah is unacceptable.

In Gaza, I drove nearly a full circuit of the Strip. I saw destroyed houses and poverty, formerly functioning industrial zones and vast greenhouses lying in ruin, and a visible security presence of the de facto authorities. In Khan Younis, I met with a number of civil society and business leaders. They stressed that the closure of Gaza was morally unacceptable and counterproductive. I agree with them. "We are surviving, not living", one said.

I was briefed by United Nations staff and by Gazans on the perilous state of the water and sanitation situation; on difficulties in every sector, from fishing and agriculture to health care and manufacturing; and on the limitations on travel and basic freedoms caused by the closure.

What struck me most were the children, and what worries me most is their future. More than half of Gaza's population is under 18 years of age, and population growth rates are high. The schools of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East are a symbol of the commitment of the international community to ensuring that Palestinian youth receive an education, as is their right. We need to build more schools, but lack the materials. The only cement available in substantial quantities in Gaza today is smuggled in through tunnels. Those who work with smugglers can build, but the United Nations and others who use legitimate products cannot.

I was pleased to be able to announce in Khan Younis that, after three years of closure, the Israeli Government has now approved the entry of material

required to complete 151 housing units in Khan Younis, carry out a water and sanitation project in Tel El-Sultan and repair the El-Bader flour mill. Israel has also agreed to expand the list of imports to include aluminum and wood. I welcomed that decision, but would like to emphasize that this is only a first and very modest step. One hundred and fifty-one units amount to far less than 1 per cent of the needs in the shelter sector alone, to say nothing of other needs. I have informed Israel that we will come back with more far-reaching proposals.

A rocket fired from Gaza into Israel by radical elements a few days before my visit killed a civilian. During my visit to the region, there were further rocket firings. While in Gaza, I condemned rocket fire and made a public appeal for non-violence and Palestinian unity.

In Israel, I met with President Peres, Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defence Minister Barak and other senior officials. My interlocutors stressed that there was no alternative to direct talks if core issues are to be resolved. The Israelis stressed the positive steps taken by Israel, including the call for direct negotiations, the removal of obstacles to movement, the Government's commitment to a two-State solution, and the policy of partial settlement restraint. However, the Prime Minister reiterated that Israel would not freeze construction in settlements in East Jerusalem. I stressed the need for all parties to do everything possible to facilitate proximity talks.

My Israeli interlocutors acknowledged significant progress in the West Bank by the Palestinian Authority and their readiness to do more to enable progress, while also expressing the concern that peaceful protest not turn violent and the importance of restraint on both sides.

I discussed Gaza with all my interlocutors. I called once again for the closure policy to be changed.

I met the parents of Corporal Shalit, who pointed out that their son had been denied the basic right of any prisoner — that of third-party visits.

My interlocutors expressed Israel's frustration with the situation in South Lebanon, where Israel believes that Hizbullah is rearming at an alarming rate. I understand Israel's legitimate security concerns and the importance of addressing them, along with the concerns of all parties, as efforts continue to achieve the implementation of United Nations resolutions on Lebanon. At the same time, I conveyed my belief that a genuine and viable peace process, leading to the end of the Arab-Israel conflict as envisaged in other resolutions of this Council, is the key to long-term stability in the region.

The Israeli Government also raised another regional matter — the Iranian nuclear issue. I share and appreciate Israel's concerns. I noted that there is an international consensus to address this question and that a crucial diplomatic process is under way. I emphasized the need to approach the matter in this context.

At the Arab League summit in Sirte, I will brief Arab leaders about the Quartet meeting and my visit to the region. I will urge them to support the proximity talks. It is crucial for the Arab countries to help create a favourable atmosphere in which the talks can succeed.

Let me close by stressing four key messages that emerged from my visit. First, there is no alternative to negotiations for a comprehensive and just resolution of the conflict, and no alternative to addressing all the core issues for a two-State solution. Negotiations must start without delay.

Secondly, we must not let negotiations be disrupted by provocations. No doubt, there will be tests. The parties themselves must take steps to meet obligations and build trust. Extremists and spoilers must see that the parties are determined to press ahead.

Thirdly, the situation on the ground is crucial. There have been too many negative facts being created on the ground, and these need to stop. We need more positive facts, such as calm and restraint, reconstruction in Gaza and transformative change in the West Bank.

Fourthly, while peace is in the hands of the parties themselves, the international community must continue to play a crucial role — supportive, insistent and, at times, catalytic.

I felt a strong consensus on the way forward in Moscow, and a determination to review progress collectively and to work more closely with both parties and the region, including the Arab League. Regional support for the peace effort and a regional approach to peace as a whole are both crucial. I will carry these messages to Libya.

Let me assure the Council of my firm commitment, and that of the United Nations as a whole, to this agenda.

The President (*spoke in French*): I thank the Secretary-General for his briefing.

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.